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• REPORT •

## Advisory Committee on Barrier Free Transportation Announced



Committee Members: Back Row (l to r) Stephen Hansen, Greg Latham, Bob Parke, Bryan Judd, Mark Iantkow, Greta Ploc, Jean de Champlain. Front Row (l to r) Bev Allison, June MacGregor, Diane Earl.



Diane Earl, Coordinator



## • MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR •

By Gary McPherson  
CHAIRPERSON

The following is a summary of the Report of the Standing Committee on Human Rights and the Status of Disabled Persons (June 1990), entitled "A Consensus for Action: The Economic Integration of Disabled Persons". The 33 page report is briefly summarized below and is followed by a commentary by the Premier's Council that focuses on its relevance for the Council and the Alberta Government.

### Report Summary

The above named committee is an outgrowth of the Special Committee responsible for the Obstacles report tabled in the House of

Commons in 1981. It is mandated by the House of Commons to "propose, promote, monitor and assess initiatives aimed at the integration and equality of disabled persons in all sectors of Canadian society". Membership consists of 14 Members of Parliament chaired by Bruce Halliday, PC-Oxford, Ontario.

The report traces the recent history of federal government action aimed at the integration of people with disabilities into society, with a particular focus on economic integration. Beginning with the publication of Obstacles, the author cites numerous committee reports and government responses to those reports that have resulted in negligible change to either policy or leg-

# Status

*Status Report is published by the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities and is intended to provoke discussion about issues facing persons with disabilities. This publication is also available in large print or audio-cassette format by contacting us at:*

Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities  
#250, 11044-82 Avenue  
Edmonton, Alberta  
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Voice or TDD





## • MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR •

isolation affecting the integration of people with disabilities. The two notable exceptions are the passage of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the establishment of National Access Awareness Week.

Despite high expectations raised by the various reports and commitments to action, the gap between expectations and actions has widened over the years, a fact that the Standing Committee attributes to "the diminished level of concern for disability-related issues at the ministerial level" and "the absence of an effective enforcement mechanism within the government".

Results of recent hearings before the Standing Committee confirmed that poverty and employment issues are central to the economic integration of people with disabilities. The report reviews the available data on employment levels and the failure of various federal programs to influence the participation rates of people with disabilities. It then goes on to examine the effect of disincentives to work inherent in many employment and income security programs, lack of education and educational opportunities, and the role of support services in facilitating or frustrating economic independence.

In its search for solutions to the virtual impasse that exists between the action of government and frus-

tration of people with disabilities, the Standing Committee identified the following:

- the importance of well-managed involvement in the political process by a strong coalition of organizations of people with disabilities using a cross disability approach to issues - the political involvement of people with disabilities in lobbying for the Americans With Disabilities Act is cited as a positive example
- development of compelling economic arguments for greater integration of disabled persons - these should be based on intensive research and analysis and focus on costs and benefits of removing barriers to integration as well as examining how various systems operate and whether it is costing more to operate them in their existing form than by making changes
- the establishment of a mechanism to ensure accountability at the centre of government, in particular the appointment of a ranking official of the Privy Council Office to assume responsibility for disabled persons and to assure that disability-related issues remain on the Cabinet agenda - this would ultimately be replaced by something like a Prime Minister's Council
- promotion of greater levels of federal-provincial cooperation around the administration of cost-

"...poverty and employment issues are central to the economic integration of people with disabilities."



## • MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR •

sharing programs - the means by which this could occur would be discussed at the First Ministers Conference this fall.

### Commentary

The parallels between this report and the recently released Premier's Council Action Plan are substantial. Both highlight the need for policy and legislative revision and new mechanisms for coordination and cooperation among departments and between levels of government.

In many ways, Alberta has demonstrated leadership in the promotion of integration and equality of people with disabilities through the establishment of the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities and acceptance of the Council's vision document with commitment to citizenship as its first principle. Economic arguments

in support of policy changes are valid ones, but social ("the right thing to do") and economic arguments have driven policy development for decades, ignoring the basic principle of citizenship for people with disabilities. A commitment to citizenship for all is essential if we do not wish to further marginalize individuals with disabilities by focusing solely on the economics of policy development.

The Alberta Premier's Council strongly supports the existence of a similar mechanism at the federal level. People with disabilities will continue to be frustrated in their search for independence if the political agenda differs between the province and the federal government. It is our hope that the Government of Alberta will again demonstrate its leadership in carrying these issues forward to the federal agenda.

"A commitment to citizenship for all is essential if we do not wish to further marginalize individuals with disabilities..."





# Building on the Vision

## • COUNCIL UPDATE •

By Eric Boyd  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

"The Action Plan has been presented to Premier Getty..."

Eight months have passed since the Premiers Council released the **Action Plan**. While we still await formal response from the Alberta Government, it may be useful to stand back and review our progress to date, identify some of the challenges ahead, and discuss how we can continue to "build upon the Vision".

As I travel around our province, and indeed around the country, I am just beginning to realize the extent to which the Vision Paper, **Towards a New Vision of Abilities in Alberta**, has gained acceptance by Canadians with disabilities, their advocates, as well as the various levels of government. The Vision Paper rationalized the need for "transformational changes in public attitudes and public policy", developed a policy framework based upon citizenship rights and proposed five principles to which we must all adhere as we strive for equality for Canadians with disabilities. In response to overwhelming support from a broad representation of Albertans with disabilities, Premier Getty announced the government's formal endorsement of the Vision paper in December 1989 and stated "I am determined to have our province use this opportunity to fundamentally change the lives of people with disabilities."

The vision paper paved the way for the development of the **Action Plan** which was released publicly in

Spring, 1990. The **Action Plan** reviews public policies affecting persons with disabilities in ten areas (Education, Training, Employment, Housing, Accessibility, Transportation, Recreation, Personal Support, Income Support, Information). Long term goals were established, concerns identified, and recommendations with time frames directed to the appropriate government department. Concerns and solutions, consistent with the principles, were identified following extensive consultation with stakeholders throughout the province including government departments. To date, in addition to the 3000 copies originally mailed to stakeholders, an additional 8000 copies have been requested and mailed to organizations, municipal governments, business, government departments and other provinces. Members of the Council and staff have received numerous requests to make presentations to groups, organizations, and government officials to further explain the intent and direction of the **Action Plan**. The **Action Plan** has been presented to Premier Getty with a request that Cabinet adopt it as their policy direction in this important area for the 90's.

Throughout the summer Council has met one on one with most Cabinet Ministers soliciting support and discussing the implications of government approval. In late October we wrapped up this series of meetings with a presentation before the Economic Affairs Committee and Health and Social Services Committee of Caucus. A formal





## • COUNCIL UPDATE •

response from government is anticipated shortly. We have stressed the importance of Cabinet endorsement for the following reasons:

- The **Action Plan** is 55 inter-related, rather than independent, recommendations and must be viewed and implemented in that context. (Needs commitment from all departments.)

- In an economic climate of restraint, the **Action Plan** must be given priority, which will require reassessment of current priorities and reallocation of existing resources.

- While most departments have been supportive of the **Action Plan** in principle, they await overall government commitment before establishing priorities for implementation. Such a statement of commitment will not only send a clear message to departments, but will also publicly communicate a message of commitment to action by the Alberta Government.

Since the release of the **Action Plan** and without having received an overall government response, it is fair to say that many departments have taken significant steps toward implementing many of the recommendations. In other sections of **Status Report**, we will make efforts to inform Albertans of progress on these initiatives. It is also important to remember that we have strongly advocated for consumer input as the recommendations are implemented (e.g. Consumer Advisory Committee on

Barrier Free Transportation to assist with the development of a provincial policy).

The Vision Paper advocates the need for transformational change. The Council sees its role as being a catalyst for change. Probably the greatest challenge which will face all of us in the future will be how to effectively manage the process. Major changes of this magnitude are always accompanied by elements of fear, anxiety, disruption, misunderstanding and apprehension. Government is concerned with how the "system" can accommodate the changes which the **Action Plan** recommends. Traditional organizations will be anxious about their changing roles, indeed some will feel threatened. Politicians will be concerned about the consequences of some of the difficult decisions which will have to be made if priorities have to be changed and resources reallocated. While it will be important for us all to be aware of the dynamics of change, one should view them as essentially positive, as change is necessarily a disruptive process. After all there is some truth in the adage "No pain, no gain".

In the months ahead the Premier's Council, individual Albertans with disabilities, and their representative organizations must continue to press for action which will move us closer to a realization of the vision which we have embraced. This will require that we fully understand the vision and promote it on every front. Share it with your friends and colleagues, print it in your newslet-

"Government is concerned with how the "system" can accommodate the changes which the Action Plan recommends."





## • COUNCIL UPDATE •

ter, write your MLA and ask for his/her support. Swaying public opinion will make things happen so much faster. This is not to say that it will be easy, but it can be done!

In closing, I leave you with some words of wisdom from Benjamin Franklin. "To get the bad customs

of a country changed and new ones, though better ones, introduced, it is necessary first to remove the prejudices of the people, enlighten their ignorance and convince them that their interest will be promoted by the proposed changes -- and this is not the work of a day!"

## • NEWS SHORTS •

On July 27, 1990 the Association for Multi-Image International awarded a gold medal to the HEROES program, a one-hour multimedia program which encourages teenagers to take responsibility for their lives. Thus far the program has been seen by more than 50,000 teens across the province of Alberta. The program is run by Injury Awareness and Prevention Centre at the University of Alberta and funded, in part, by the Wild Rose Foundation which presented a \$50,000 cheque to the Centre in April of 1990.

In April, Hon. Mr. Dinning and Hon. Mr. Kowalski presented a cheque in the amount of \$30,368 to representatives of the Canadian Association of Research in Rehabilitation on behalf of the Wild Rose Foundation. Accepting the grant were Steven Dennis (President), John Semple (Vice President), Jim Vargo (Vice President), Joe Hudson (Director), and Ilan Hershman (Director).

AGT has introduced a telephone with special features that will allow people with visual, movement, and hearing disabilities to more easily communicate and be more independent. The Big Button Plus phone has a large button, black and white keypad that is much easier to see and use than the keypads of conventional phones. In addition, three symbol-coded, one-touch emergency buttons let you assign fire, police and medical emergency numbers for fast dialling. Adjustable volume control is also a feature of this new telephone. The Big Button Plus phone is available at your nearest AGT Phone Centre at the cost of \$99.95.





# Action Plan Prompts Response

## • HOUSING •

It has become very apparent in the last year that housing is a major concern for people with disabilities in the province of Alberta. Several conferences have been held, including sessions sponsored by the Handicapped Housing Society and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. The Premier's Council **Action Plan** has expressly addressed the housing area, calling for people with disabilities to be afforded "the same range of accessible and affordable housing options that other Albertans accept as their right" (**Action Plan** p. 39). With this in mind, the recommendations in this area focus on the development of a comprehensive province-wide housing policy by April 1991 that "will ensure that Albertans with all types of disabilities can choose from a range of affordable and accessible housing options" (**Action Plan** p. 41). Alberta Municipal Affairs and Housing is the provincial department charged with this responsibility.

In response to the **Action Plan**, an internal working committee has been appointed from the Housing Division of Municipal Affairs and Housing. The function of this committee will be to coordinate and review housing policies and priori-

ties in relation to the recommendations of the **Action Plan**. In addition, the department is developing a data base on the housing needs of people with disabilities in the province. It is the goal of the department to have a comprehensive housing policy for people with disabilities (as per **Action Plan** recommendation 6.1) in place by October 1991. This housing plan will be developed in consultation with stakeholder groups, including people with disabilities.

As well, developments are beginning to happen with regard to municipal land use by-laws which affect group homes for people with mental disabilities. Recently, the council of the City of Red Deer gave first reading to an amendment of its land use by-law, which will end discrimination towards people with mental disabilities in the area of housing. The amendment is largely the result of recent court rulings in British Columbia and Manitoba, which struck down similar by-laws in other municipalities, and the amendments to the Individual's Rights Protection Act, in which people with mental disabilities are now included. It is the hope of the Council that other municipalities will soon follow suit.

"It is the goal of the department to have a comprehensive housing policy for people with disabilities..."





# Americans with Disabilities Act

## • RIGHTS •

"The Act bans discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment, transportation, public service and accommodations, and communications."

The following provides a brief summary of the history and intent of the Americans with Disabilities Act that was signed into law on July 29, 1990. It is viewed by both proponents and opponents as sweeping human rights legislation that has the potential to influence the way people with disabilities in the U.S. are served, and to clog the courts and frustrate the lawmakers for years. While the product may not be one that Canadians would necessarily pursue, the sentiment that has driven the political process in the U.S. is mimicked here as well: it is that desire which resides in all of us to be treated fairly and with dignity, and to share the rights and responsibilities accorded to other members of society.

The Americans with Disabilities Act was introduced to the United States Senate on May 9, 1989; it passed the Senate in September, 1989, and moved to the House of Representatives where it also passed on May 22, 1990. On June 26, 1990 a joint Senate-House committee reviewed amendments passed in the House and settled on a version that went back to each assembly for final vote. The Act was signed into law by President Bush on July 26, 1990. It has received overwhelming political support throughout the process without being compromised by weakening amendments.

The Act bans discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment, transportation, public service and accommodations, and communications. Since 1973 federal law has protected against discrimination in federal employment or in any program that has federal support, but the new Act covers the entire private sector. The major impact is summarized in the following sections.

### Public Accommodations

The Act not only requires auditoriums, doctors' and dentists' offices, restaurants, hotels and recreational facilities to be accessible, it requires provision of auxiliary aids such as interpreters for deaf people, readers and Braille text for those who are visually impaired, and availability of equipment or devices for those with other disabilities.

### Employment

In the area of employment, no employer, employment agency or labour organization can discriminate against an individual with a disability who, with or without reasonable accommodation, can perform the essential functions of the job. Reasonable accommodation includes making facilities accessible as well as job restructuring, part-time or modified work schedules, acquisition or modification of equipment, modification of procedures and other similar accommodations. Only employers with less than 15 employees are exempt from compliance.





"...we all have a responsibility in creating equity of opportunity..."

## • RIGHTS •

### Transportation

This public service is the one that has received the most attention. Under the Act, municipalities are required to purchase or lease only vehicles that are readily accessible and usable by people with disabilities, including those using wheelchairs. At the same time, they are required to provide parallel transit for those who are unable to use the fixed route transit system. Retrofitting of existing vehicles is not required, and there is a multi-year phase-in period allowed. For example, railroad operators will be required within five years to have one vehicle per train that is accessible.

### Communications

This section of the Act requires the provision of telecommunications relay services across the country

for persons with hearing and speech impairments. It also requires any television public service announcements produced or funded by any federal agency to include closed captioning.

The Act is supported to a greater extent by the politicians than by the private sector, which will bear the brunt of any expense involved in compliance, but this demonstration of political will to state that we all have a responsibility in creating equity of opportunity is laudable. The question of managing enforcement goes largely unanswered at this time; however, the Act includes sanctions for non-compliance and permits people discriminated against in employment to seek back pay, reinstatement and lawyers' fees.

**Is your association or agency sponsoring a provincial or national conference or workshop? If so, please forward the pertinent information to:**

**Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities  
#250, 11044-82 Avenue  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T6G 0T2**





## Recreation Initiatives

"Considerable efforts are now underway to establish barrier free standards..."

### • RECREATION •

In the Recreation section of the Premier's Council's **Action Plan**, the main thrust is centred on the integration of people with disabilities into the everyday recreational opportunities of the community. The objective of this section is **"to create full accessibility to all publicly funded recreation facilities and leisure pursuits by the year 2000, so that every Albertan has an equitable opportunity to improve the quality of his or her life through pursuit of recreational and leisure activities of choice"** (**Action Plan** p. 30). Two departments within the provincial government have been targeted: Alberta Recreation and Parks and Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism.

The Premier's Council has recommended that Alberta Recreation and Parks "develop a policy on barrier free design and access to all publicly funded parks and recreation facilities by 1991" (**Action Plan** p. 32). This means that people with disabilities will be able to access the same parks as the community-at-large and will not be segregated with respect to recreational facilities. Considerable efforts are now underway to establish barrier free standards, modelled on Long Lake Provincial Park, for both new construction and the retrofitting of existing facilities. In addition, the department is developing a long range strategy for the upgrading of existing provincial parks. The department has recently announced that a new bus, equipped for wheel-

chair accessibility, has been purchased for Dinosaur Provincial Park. This bus will allow people with disabilities to experience the relatively inaccessible badlands area. Also, two accessible display buildings will soon be completed.

Additionally, the Premier's Council has recommended that Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism "develop a policy on barrier free access to all publicly funded cultural facilities and events by 1991" (**Action Plan** p. 32). Thus, people with disabilities will be able to use the same facilities and attend the same events as the rest of the community. Previously, the department had made efforts to improve physical accessibility to both the Jubilee Auditoria in Edmonton and Calgary and to the sixteen provincial museums throughout the province, to implement a talking book service through the Library Services Branch, and to provide acoustiguide recordings for people with hearing impairments in some facilities. Since the release of the **Action Plan**, the department has taken steps in the volunteer programs at the Frank Slide Interpretive Centre and the Remington-Alberta Carriage Centre. As well, \$25,000 has been provided to the Slave Lake Provincial Park Advisory Committee to provide wheelchair access to its beach area. As can be seen from these initiatives, progress is being made in the area of recreation, but everyone involved in recreation must help us pursue this goal.





# Information Initiatives

## • INFORMATION •

Recommendation 10.1 in part called for the "development of a regional information database on disability" and "establishment of a stakeholder advisory committee to ensure consumer input into the development and utilization of the network."

People with disabilities, not unlike the rest of the population, are finding themselves overwhelmed by the "information explosion". The search for accurate and useable information often results in the "revolving door" syndrome.

Since the completion of the feasibility study conducted by the Walter Dinsdale Centre in 1988, the Council has been actively seeking ways to give form to the concept of an Alberta Information Network. A summary of achievements to date include:

- Agreement by Alberta Centre for Well Being to house the project, assist in its development, and provide administrative support.
- Premier's Council has provided all computer hardware necessary for development of main database and operation of first three "information centres".
- Secondment of a full time project manager to coordinate development of the project.

The next major step will be to bring together a provincial stakeholder advisory committee to provide input to the project manager and consultants in the development of the database. Letters calling for nominations will be sent to all organizations throughout the province. It is anticipated that the advisory committee will be in place early in the new year.

In addition to the ongoing involvement of the advisory committee, participation in the project by all stakeholder groups will be critical if the database and network is to be effective. If you or your organization are interested in knowing more about the Alberta Information Network, or are interested in participating in this exciting project, please contact:

Rod McPherson  
Project Manager  
Alberta Information Network  
c/o Alberta Centre for Well Being  
12245 - 131 Street  
Edmonton, Alberta T5L 1M8

Telephone: 448-0180  
FAX: 455-2092  
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RMCPPERSON





# Community Supports Unit Clarified

## • PERSONAL SUPPORTS •

*by Fran Vargo*  
DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH AND  
POLICY DEVELOPMENT

"...some will still require some form of support to remove a barrier that is strictly a function of the disability..."

In the Premier's Council Action Plan, recommendations 8.1 and 8.2 ask Cabinet to examine the feasibility of establishing a new approach to the provision of supports to people with disabilities. A ministerial task force is recommended to provide direction in the design and implementation of a community supports unit as a way of consolidating existing programs.

**The purpose of this paper is to further describe the Council's vision of this new approach and to clarify the action requested in these recommendations.**

### Background

The theme woven throughout the Action Plan is that of citizenship, and therefore equality of access, for people with disabilities. Wherever possible, recommendations have been made that will ultimately result in the use of generic services for all people who seek that service, whether they have a disability or not. This will mean that housing needs will be met through Alberta Municipal Affairs and Housing, not Alberta Family and Social Services. Training and employment programs will be accessed through Alberta Advanced Education or Alberta Career Development and Employment, not Alberta Family and Social Services. Everyone will have access to the same recreation

facilities and the same transportation systems to the greatest extent possible.

When people with disabilities have equal access to facilities and programs as their non-disabled counterparts some will still require some form of support to remove a barrier that is strictly a function of the disability in order to participate fully. A child may need a wheelchair or a sign language interpreter in order to attend school but will not necessarily need a special program of education; an adolescent may need a job coach or a specially adapted computer to participate in the regular work experience program of his or her school; a young mother may need a few hours of homemaking assistance in order to care for her home and family; or an elderly widower may need a hot meal daily and handrails in the bathroom in order to stay independent in his home.

All of these supports and more are presently available, but access to them is hampered by the multiplicity of programs and eligibility requirements described in the Personal Supports chapter of the Action Plan. The important distinction here is between programs like post-secondary education or employment preparation courses and supports which may stand alone, like Home Care services, or be sub-components of larger programs, like disabled student services within post-secondary education.





## • PERSONAL SUPPORTS •

### A New Approach

The Council's vision of this new approach to the provision of supports, created from an examination of existing programs and the desires expressed by people with disabilities, is that of "one stop shopping". People do not want to go to Career Development and Employment or Advanced Education for funding for an adapted keyboard, then to the Aids to Daily Living program for a wheelchair, and then to the Home Care program for personal care assistance, and finally to a service club in the community for adaptations to a vehicle so they can drive, just so they can attend college. How much easier it would be to motivate individuals to seek education and training if they could identify all their needs to one department and have those needs met because they are legitimate, rather than on the basis of sometimes arbitrary guidelines.

In practical terms, a consolidated system would have one philosophy and one set of basic eligibility criteria. The "single point of entry" concept that has been developed through the Home Care program seems to be a workable model and one that might be expanded in scope. At present, some of the support programs embody service providers (e.g. Home Care) while others provide funding to individuals to purchase service (e.g. Social Allowance for the Disabled). Both

of these are feasible within a consolidated unit although it may be more efficient to focus on funding rather than service provision and leave the latter to community agencies. By offering a direct funding option to those who wish it, more dollars might be available for supports that would otherwise be applied to the administrative costs of service provision.

Centres of expertise within the unit would be valuable to ensure that appropriate advice was available. This expertise could come from personnel in the various programs that now exist, or from community agencies skilled and knowledgeable in the needs of people with particular disabilities.

### Role of Task Force

Before any decisions can be made about the feasibility of consolidation of supports into a single unit, many issues must be examined and some of these are outlined in the proposed terms of reference itemized in recommendation 8.2 of the Action Plan; organizational structure, eligibility criteria, assessment and planning, effect on federal-provincial cost sharing, entry point and staffing are among those issues.

An interdepartmental task force with representation from Education, Career Development and Employment, Health, Family and Social

"...a consolidated system would have one philosophy and one set of basic eligibility criteria."





## • PERSONAL SUPPORTS •

Services, Advanced Education, and the Premier's Council, has been established to create its own "vision" of this new approach and make a recommendation to Cabinet, including philosophy/mission of the unit, time frames, and a plan for transfer of resources. In the

event that there are insurmountable barriers to the proposed consolidation, it is anticipated that an alternate proposal will be submitted by this task force. The first meeting is to be held on October 26, 1990.

## • ACCESSIBILITY •

The Alberta Building Code is the major provincial legislation driving accessibility, Section 3.7, which affects the provision of barrier free access through design and enforcement standards. It is the objective of the Premier's Council to improve these standards to ensure that **"all new public buildings and external built environments such as sidewalks and parking areas are completely accessible to all persons with disabilities by the year 1996"** (Action Plan p. 43).

The Alberta Building Code is reviewed every five years by the Building Standards Council, which then makes recommendations for change to the Minister of Labour, who is responsible for the Code. The Barrier Free Design Committee has been established to inform the Building Standards Council of changes needed in the area of accessibility. The committee has made a number of recommendations, which the Council supports and has incorporated as recommendation 7.1 of the

**Action Plan.** These changes have been released to the public for discussion and all, except that with regard to parking, have been approved by the Building Standards Council and sent to the minister as part of the proposed amendments to the Code. If incorporated, these changes will greatly improve access for all people with disabilities in pursuit of the previously stated objective of the Council in this area.

The Premier's Council has recommended that Alberta Labour review its enforcement policies with regard to Section 3.7 and that Alberta Labour assist in the development of a provincial Barrier Free Design Centre. It has also been recommended that the role of the Barrier Free Design Committee be strengthened by ensuring that it is a permanent subcommittee of the Building Standards Council, with its Chairperson as a member of that Council. There have been indications from the Minister that there will be movement to comply with these recommendations.





# Property Tax Reduction Program

## • FINANCIAL SUPPORTS •

By Fran Vargo  
DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH AND  
POLICY DEVELOPMENT

There exists in Alberta a program designed to reduce property taxes payable by seniors who live in their own homes by up to \$1000 per year (Senior Citizen Homeowner Benefit). People with disabilities and their advocates have, from time to time, questioned why this benefit has not been extended to include people with disabilities. The argument is made that if the benefit is extended to seniors because of the reduced levels of income that frequently exist for those over 65 years then people with disabilities, who are also often living on very low incomes, should also be the recipients of this benefit. **This then is a poverty issue and not one of age or disability per se.**

In 1987, the City of Calgary brought a motion before the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA) resolving "that the benefits available to senior citizens be extended to mentally and physically handicapped persons under the age of 65 who reside in their own homes." The motion was carried but no action has been taken by government as efforts to reduce the provincial deficit have been paramount.

In 1990, the City of Calgary has again put forward a motion to AUMA to be debated at the AUMA conference in September. This motion asks for a review of the concept of

including a senior citizen property tax deferment program similar to that enacted in British Columbia. Since the program in B.C. also permits property tax deferment for people with disabilities, it is assumed that it is the intent of this motion to include this group as well.

### Alberta and B.C. Property Tax Reduction Programs

**1. Basic Home Owner Grant Program** - In B.C. the basic grant is available to permanent residents who own and occupy their homes (principal residence only) and currently reduces taxes by up to \$430 for eligible property owners. This is similar to the Property Tax Reduction Program in Alberta through which the Provincial Education Tax is paid by the provincial government on behalf of home owners who have resided in their homes for at least 120 days of the year.

**2. Additional Home Owner Grant** - In B.C. a further grant of up to \$270 is available to qualifying applicants who are aged 65 or older, veterans or their spouses receiving veterans allowances, or physically disabled persons receiving income assistance under Guaranteed Available Income for Need (GAIN) or who otherwise qualify with a physician's certificate. This certificate is only to be provided to





"To afford people in similar circumstances different treatment on the basis of age is discrimination."

## • FINANCIAL SUPPORTS •

individuals with a physical disability of a permanent nature which necessitates costly modifications to the home, or extensive physical assistance to enable normal functioning in the home. Property owners with physically disabled spouses or relatives who reside permanently with them may also qualify.

In Alberta the Senior Citizen Homeowner Benefit provides for a tax reduction to senior citizens and widows or widowers aged 55 to 64 under certain conditions. The total benefit cannot exceed \$1000 including the Provincial Education Tax reduction described above.

### 3. Land Tax Deferment Program

- This programs permits deferment of property taxes on the principal residence for Canadian citizens or landed immigrants who have lived in B.C. for at least one year prior to application **and** who are aged 60 or over, a widow or widower, or a handicapped person as defined in the GAIN Act. Under this program all or part of the taxes remaining after the above grants have been accessed may be deferred until the property is transferred to a new owner, the owner dies or the owner's equity is not sufficient to ensure the Crown's security. Upon meeting one of these conditions, all outstanding taxes plus simple interest must be repaid. A surviving spouse may apply to have the agreement transferred to his or her name.

No similar program currently exists in Alberta.

### Commentary

The underlying principles of the various property tax reduction programs described above contain inconsistencies that result in unequal treatment of groups on the basis of factors that are prohibited under human rights legislation. These are outlined below.

### 1. Age Discrimination

All seniors are entitled to receive the additional home owner grant in B.C. or the Senior Citizen Homeowner Benefit in Alberta, because of their age but regardless of their financial status. Although many would argue that significant numbers of seniors live on very marginal incomes and therefore "deserve" this tax break, the condition of poverty is a reality for many others who are not afforded the same consideration. Many people with disabilities would be included as would some single parents.

To afford people in similar circumstances different treatment on the basis of age is discrimination.

### 2. Disability Discrimination

Although no property tax reduction program is available to people with disabilities under age 65 in Alberta,



## • FINANCIAL SUPPORTS •

the B.C. program is cited as an example to be emulated. The stated purpose of the B.C. program is to provide an additional benefit when there is a physical disability that would result in substantial costs for home modifications or physical assistance in the home. This focus apparently is meant to take into consideration some of the significant costs of the disability but restricts the benefit to those with a physical disability.

The interpretation guidelines define physical assistance as extensive supervision and care, giving as examples meal preparation, personal care and hygiene. People with significant mental disabilities may require assistance in all of these areas, yet the program information clearly articulates a need for the applicant to have a physical disability.

Not only is the current benefit level (up to \$270 per year) insignificant in defraying the costs of a physical disability of this magnitude, eligibility for this additional grant seems to be independent of any consideration of other outside assistance with the described costs (e.g., home care services, home adaptation grants) or of income levels of applicants.

The Land Tax Deferment Program does not appear to discriminate on the basis of disability since it uses the definition from the GAIN Act which includes mental disabilities.

It is, however, restricted to select groups of individuals rather than being generally available to anyone who may be under financial hardship. Since the taxes and accrued interest must eventually be paid, there is no readily apparent reason to restrict eligibility on any basis other than ability to pay.

### Proposed Resolutions

The Premier's Council supports the principle of equity of access. Since there is nothing inherent in the age 65 or in disability that warrants special treatment with regard to property taxes, the Council is unable to support any resolutions that would tend to result in favored treatment of any groups on the basis of age or disability.

What is at issue here is poverty that results in the inability to pay one's full tax assessment, poverty that may or may not be related to age or disability, but certainly is not restricted to seniors or people with disabilities. If the intent of special tax reduction and/or deferment programs is to provide temporary or permanent relief for all home owners living in poverty, then seniors and people with disabilities would only enjoy these benefits when they qualified on the basis of income.

While it may be admirable to defray some of the costs of disability through property tax reductions, as





## • FINANCIAL SUPPORTS •

B.C. has attempted to do, this is not the preferred method of providing these supports. When a financial benefit is proposed to reduce taxes, it must do so for egalitarian reasons.

### Conclusion

The Premier's Council acknowledges the spirit of caring that motivated the inception of existing policies, and also the stress of poverty that results in requests to broaden inclusion to other groups. However, it would be inconsistent with our own principles to support the resolutions made by the City of Calgary. We strongly recommend that current and future policies in this area be revised to focus on the real issue: poverty.

### Action Taken

This paper was prepared by the

Premier's Council and submitted to a number of people including the Deputy Minister of Alberta Municipal Affairs and Housing, the President of the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA), and the mayor of Calgary with a request that this information be given to members of AUMA at their conference in September 1990 before they vote on the latest resolution.

When issues of this nature come up, the Council makes every effort to advocate for change on the basis of the principles contained in our statement of philosophy, and in the process to educate groups and individuals about directions for policy change. At this time we do not know what impact this information will have on this issue but we see it as part of a process of rethinking how benefits are allocated.



# VRDP Changes

## • TRAINING •

Alberta Career Development and Employment has recently undergone some re-organization within the department and there are some new faces in the Vocational Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons (VRDP) area:

- Jim Geekie is the Executive Director of Corporate Delivered Programs - those programs delivered by the department rather than by the regional office. VRDP and Alberta Vocational Training (AVT) are included in these programs.

- Debi Piecowye is the new operations manager of these programs. She is very busy learning about the programs and how they currently operate so that she is able to evaluate the recommendations made by the Premier's Council for improvements.

Some changes have already been implemented, as discussed below.

- Because AISH has had the implied condition of being for people whose disability was too severe to allow them to work, receiving AISH used to prevent people from accessing programs through Career Development and Employment. This is no longer the case. Being an AISH recipient now only

limits the amount of student allowance an individual can receive in programs where this applies.

- An appeal process has been developed and is being tested and refined now. The right to appeal will be available to individuals who disagree with a decision that has been made with regard to their acceptance into a program. Details will be available once the policy has been finalized.

- In the recent past, applications for VRDP support were forwarded to the Training Selection Committee for a decision without the opportunity for the career counsellor to attend and provide additional information or answer questions. Counsellors are once again invited to participate in this process.

In addition, a committee comprised of representatives of the departments of Family and Social Services and Career Development and Employment has been struck with respect to the transfer of training resources from Family and Social Services to Career Development and Employment. The mandate of the committee is to review the impact, logistics, and concerns involved in such a shift of resources.





# Transportation Advisory Committee Announced

## • TRANSPORTATION •

Albertans with disabilities desire to be active, fully participating members of society. To be educated, work and take part in the community, adequate transportation is essential. When physical barriers prevent an individual with a disability from using services like transportation, these barriers must be removed or an equitable alternative must be provided.

Alberta Transportation and Utilities is working toward transportation systems which will enable all individuals to move about Alberta.

In June 1990, Minister Al "Boomer" Adair announced the establishment of an Advisory Committee on Barrier Free Transportation. The formation of this committee is in response to a key recommendation in the **Action Plan** released in March 1990 by the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. This committee is comprised of knowledgeable people who represent persons with disabilities, rural and urban municipalities and the inter-city bus and taxi industry. Members will advise the department on the development and implementation of a barrier free transportation and mobility policy. They will act as a technical advisory committee for the development of barrier free standards, advise on rural and urban transportation needs, and also function in an ongoing advisory capacity.

The Advisory Committee's inaugural meeting was held in Edmonton September 20th, 1990. At this meeting the committee reviewed

the recommendations in the **Action Plan** by the Premier's Council. Eric Boyd of the Premier's Council attended the meeting to provide an overview and answer questions. The committee also discussed the roles of the federal government, the department, municipalities and industry in providing infrastructure and services for disabled people. Presentations were made on the department's current grant programs to municipalities and regulatory activities (Motor Transport Services).

Working with consumers, municipalities, and the transportation industry, the department is taking up the challenge the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities has given Alberta. That challenge is "barrier free transportation systems within the province that meet transportation needs for local and intraprovincial travel, as well as barrier free pedestrian environments within municipalities by the year 2000".

If you have questions or concerns about the transportation of persons with disabilities or would like to provide input to the Advisory Committee on Barrier Free Transportation, contact Diane Earl at 427-7944 in Policy and Strategic Planning on the second floor of the Twin Atria Building, 4999-98 Avenue, Edmonton.

A partnership between consumers with disabilities, rural and urban municipalities, the transportation industry and Alberta Transportation and Utilities has been formed

"Members will advise the department on the development and implementation of a barrier free transportation and mobility policy."





## • TRANSPORTATION •

to provide recommendations on policies for barrier free systems and services in Alberta. Members of the Advisory Committee are: Stephen Hansen, Special Needs Transportation Coordinator, Calgary; Greg Latham, Manager of Edmonton Transit; Bob Parke, Senior Vice President, Government Affairs and Industry Relations, Greyhound Bus Lines; Bryan Judd, Administrator, Good Samaritan Auxiliary Hospital and Chairman of the DATS Advisory Board; Mark Iantkow, Canadian National Institute for the Blind; Gretel Ploc, DATS

Advisory Board; Jean de Champlain, Councillor, M.D. Westlock; Bev Allison, Handicapped and Elderly Transportation Committee of Calgary; June MacGregor, Assistant Deputy Minister, Planning and Development, Alberta Transportation and Utilities, Chairperson to Committee; Diane Earl, Coordinator, Barrier Free Transportation, Alberta Transportation and Utilities, Secretary to Committee; Bob Findlay, Vice President, Yellow/Prestige Cabs, Grey Goose Bus Lines.

June MacGregor, Assistant Deputy Minister, Planning and Development Division, has announced the recent appointment of Diane Earl to the position of Coordinator, Barrier-Free Transportation.

In this new two-year position, Diane will support the department and the Advisory Committee on Barrier-free Transportation for Persons with Disabilities. This Committee was recently announced by the Minister and includes representatives from a range of disability areas, urban and rural municipalities and the inter-city bus industry. Diane will assist in assessing the transportation needs of persons with disabilities, and in developing policy initiatives and standards for barrier-free transportation and mobility in Alberta.

Since her graduation from the Uni-

versity of Alberta, Diane has worked for several agencies which provide services to people who have disabilities and to professionals such as architects, engineers and planners in this area. She also volunteers for many related committees, helping to insure full access to programs, services and facilities.

Diane's office is on the second floor of the Twin Atria Building and her phone number is 427-7944. She reports through Don Szarko, Director of Policy, to the department's Steering Committee on Barrier-Free Transportation which is chaired by June MacGregor and includes Brian Marcotte, Executive Director, Urban Transportation and Roger Clarke, Director of Support Services, Motor Transport Services.





# Abilities Placement Program-ALCB

## • EMPLOYMENT •

Liquor store clerk Ben Barker hurt his back. He needed hospitalization and long-term therapy. After several months Ben had recovered enough to get around in reasonable comfort.

He could sit, stand, walk around, operate a cash register, use the phone - everything he did on the job before his injury except lift heavy objects. But so long as lifting heavy objects was part of the job, Ben could not return to work for the ALCB. Even when recovery had progressed enough to allow the performance of some types of work, Ben could not be placed in a different job, one suited to his physical limitations. But because he was capable of doing some kinds of work, after two years his LTDI benefits expired and his knowledge and experience were lost by the ALCB as he looked for work elsewhere.

Ben is fictitious, but his situation is not. A program has been introduced to help people in similar situations. The Abilities Placement Program allows the staff member to retain meaningful employment in a different position, through retraining if necessary, and allows the ALCB to retain the skills, abilities and knowledge of valued employees. Everyone benefits.

To qualify for the program, an employee must:

1. have a physical, mental,

or emotional disability documented by a physician

2. be permanently disabled from full duties of their regular job, as deemed by a Medical Board and

3. meet the program's admission criteria by participating in an assessment by an external Employee Assistance Program referral resource, involving interest/apptitude, skills/abilities and motivation testing.

Each job placement within the Abilities Placement Program will be determined case-by-case, based on the ALCB's operational needs, Medical Board conclusions, assessment process, and Human Resources Division's recommendation on available positions, employee/position match, and relative pay rates.

Workplace modifications and technical supports will be provided where needed if government funding is available to cover the costs involved.

"Employees have been asking for this type of program for a number of years," says Occupational Health and Safety Manager Kathleen Dunn. "Chairman Bob King's understanding of social programs and his openness to listening to employees who are off work due to disability paved the way for this program."



## • EMPLOYMENT •

The program will be reviewed twice a year, with a report to the Chairman outlining the cost/benefit ratio - the additional costs versus the cost savings arising from the program. Kathleen expects the savings to outweigh the costs involved.

This initiative is designed to help those employees who are physically, mentally and emotionally ready to return to work even though they may be restricted as to the type of work they can do. No pressure will be applied on those who have not reached that point.

For more information about the program, contact Dianne Berlin, Occupational Health Nurse, at the St. Albert office, 458-4097. Dianne will be talking to every employee currently on LTDI to advise them of the program.

## • THE LAST WORD •

I walk past a movie house  
and I see a poster blaring  
"Warning: Crazy People are  
Coming"  
and immediately I am offended  
for I'm not crazy.  
I'm ill.

I am already an important  
part of this community;  
my volunteer services  
are invaluable;  
my creativity  
adds to the culture;  
my spending  
helps the economy.  
I'm not an alien  
from outer space  
to be laughed and jeered at  
in a movie house.  
I'm an essential member  
in the family  
of man.

-L. Clay, High River